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SUBJECT: PEACE CORPS DIRECTOR'S MEETING WITH ORTEGA POSITIVE

Classified By: Ambassador Paul A. Trivelli for reasons 1.4(b,d)

11. (C) SUMMARY: On Thursday, January 17, Worldwide Peace Corps Director Ronald Tschetter, met with Nicaraguan President Daniel Ortega to provide an overview of Peace Corps programs and activities. Ortega, First Lady Rosario Murillo, and GON ministers displayed interest in, and satisfaction with, U.S. assistance, both from the Peace Corps and USAID. Ortega expressed regret at not having an opportunity to visit a Peace Corps project in 2007, but pledged to do so in 2008. The meeting was positive, productive, and free of any anti-US rhetoric. END SUMMARY.

Director Tschetter Provides Peace Corps Overview  
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12. (C) Director Tschetter provided Ortega, Murillo, and the ministers of health, education, and agriculture with an overview of the Peace Corps, global reach and presence -- commenting that the Peace Corps has some 8,000 volunteers working 74 countries, the highest number in 37 years -- and its program here in Nicaragua. He explained that the Nicaraguan program is in its 27th year and currently numbers nearly 170 volunteers working in education, health, and agriculture sectors. Tschetter assured Ortega that the volunteers have a "strong understanding" of Nicaragua through their daily interactions at the community level and expressed the Peace Corps, sincere appreciation for the "chance to serve" in Nicaragua.

Keen Interest in Organic Products  
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13. (C) Ortega, Murillo, and Agricultural Minister Ariel Bucardo all expressed a strong interest in organic agricultural projects, especially aimed at small producers and women. Murillo asked about an organic agriculture program that had operated "for years in the past" and queried whether this program was still operational. The Ambassador mentioned that a Michigan State University program and another implemented through the Adventist Development Relief Agency (ADRA) recently ended, but that a new agricultural sector program was recently launched in northern Nicaragua. Picking up the theme, Bucardo repeatedly emphasized the importance of organic agriculture for small farmers and asked for U.S. support. He acknowledged that Nicaragua was producing beef and coffee in this way, but lamented the loss of an organic production program a few years earlier. Ortega was advised of the fact that, according to Peace Corps project evaluation reports, upwards of 60 % of participants in small agricultural programs are women.

"Project Excellence" Big Success  
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14. (C) Prompted by Tshcetter,s description of the Peace Corps' emphasis on educational programs, Ortega turned to Education Minister De Castilla for comment. In an uncharacteristically effusive style, De Castilla praised USAID,s "Project Excellence" program, stressing that this is a model program that others can and should learn from. De Castilla also underlined the fact that the ministry has very good relations with both the Peace Corps and USAID.

#### Supporting Local Farmers

15. (C) Following Tschetter,s overview of Peace Corps, program in Nicaragua, Ortega used the theme of rural support to segue into a discussion of his government's efforts to support local farmers by restoring grain storage infrastructure and working directly with small farmers to offer them "just" prices for their products. He criticized speculators for having driven up grain prices in the wake of Hurricane Felix and pledged that his government -- through ENABAS, the national grain board -- would stabilize supplies and prices of basic grains while improving farmers, lives. Within this context, Ortega expressed his gratitude for the work of volunteers who are assisting rural agricultural towns and families.

16. (C) The Ambassador pointed out the importance of building "connections" between (small) producers and exporters and businesses in the U.S., explaining that improving and strengthening the entire production chain is a key success factor. He specifically mentioned Walmart,s venture into the agricultural market and the positive impact that is having on smaller producers linked into their supply chains.

#### Emphasis on Community Health Programs

17. (C) Acknowledging that the communities in which there are active health promotion programs have "very positive" opinions of the U.S., Health Minister Gonzalez commented that he would like to see the assistance "better organized" but did not go into details, stating that the topic would be discussed the following day in a meeting at the Ministry. De Castilla also remarked on the importance -- and success -- of Peace Corps and USAID community health projects and their vital link to the success of community education.

#### Ortega Interested in Exchange Program

18. (C) After learning that hundreds of PCVs have cycled through Nicaragua during the program,s 27 years in Nicaragua, Ortega asked if the Peace Corps offered an exchange program, whereby qualified Nicaraguan youths -- he specifically mentioned women -- could go to the U.S. to see and learn about U.S. markets and business opportunities with an eye towards identifying future opportunities in Nicaragua upon their return.

#### Members of U.S. Delegation

Ambassador Trivelli  
Kathryn Rulon, Deputy Director of Peace Corps programs in Latin America and the Pacific  
George Baldino, Director of the Peace Corps program in Nicaragua  
Carol Barrick, Peace Corps Nicaragua Deputy Director

#### Members of Nicaraguan Delegation

Rosario Murillo, First Lady  
Guillermo Gonzalez, Health Minister  
Ariel Bucardo, Agriculture and Forestry Minister  
Miguel De Castilla, Education Minister  
Representatives from the Ministry of Foreign Affairs

